

Teaching: Inspiring British children, Slumdog style

A radical new teaching method that has been pioneered in India, Africa and Latin America is catching on in Britain, says Max Davidson.



Class act: The blockbuster *Slumdog Millionaire* was inspired by the work of Sugata Mitra in the slums of New Delhi

By Max Davidson

8:00AM BST 14 Apr 2010

"I don't mind children cribbing answers off other children," says Sugata Mitra, Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Newcastle. "It's one of the ways they can learn. I also don't think there should be too many constraints on what they can look at on the internet."

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Controversial views, perhaps, but then Professor Mitra, originally from India, is no stranger to controversy. He is an educational radical whose unorthodox experiments in the slums of New Delhi – experiments that were part of the inspiration for the blockbuster film *Slumdog Millionaire* – have sent ripples around the world.

In what became known as the Hole in the Wall project, Mitra simply knocked through a wall in his Delhi office and installed a computer with an internet connection for the local slum children to discover. To his delight he found that they soon became fully fledged autodidacts, teaching themselves English, maths and other subjects.

"It became obvious that children were capable of working by themselves, without help from teachers," Mitra

says. More to the point, the children wanted to learn, not just play computer games.

[How can we encourage children to think for themselves? \(http://debate2010.telegraph.co.uk/debate?debate=a07A00000021cOfIAI\)](http://debate2010.telegraph.co.uk/debate?debate=a07A00000021cOfIAI)

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His one quibble about the movie, which drew on his findings, was that it was not called Slumdog Nobel Laureate. "After all, the whole point of the Hole in the Wall project was to encourage children to think beyond monetary gain and want to change the world, not simply become rich."

As his academic standing rocketed, Mitra conducted similar experiments in other parts of the world, from Africa to Latin America. He is now working with children at three schools in the north-east of England, including St Aidan's C of E primary in Gateshead, where nine-year-old children are to be found researching school topics on computers, unaided by teachers. The result is what Mitra calls a Self-Organised Learning Environment, or SOLE.

How does SOLE work in practice? "The children are given a SATS or GCSE question, then divided into groups of four, each group with its own computer, and given half an hour, say, to find the answer via Google, Wikipedia or other websites. The groups compete with each other, which is good, but children also range freely around the room, seeing what other groups are doing, which is also good. There is a healthy mixture of competition and collaboration," Mitra says.

Sometimes a teacher is there but for Mitra the presence of a teacher can be a problem not a solution. "If children know there is someone standing over them who knows all the answers, they are less inclined to find the answers for themselves. It would be better, in a way, if any adults present were completely uneducated. There is nothing children like more than passing on information they have just discovered to people who may not already have it – an elderly grandmother, for instance."

Gateshead is a long way from New Delhi and these are not slum children, but it is significant that the English

schools Mitra has chosen for his experiment are in areas of social deprivation, rather than middle-class enclaves. "The best schools tend to have the best teachers, not to mention parents who supervise homework, so there is less need for self-organised learning," he says. "But where a child comes from a less supportive home environment, where there are family tensions perhaps, their schoolwork can suffer. They need to be taught to think and study for themselves."

To parents who are worried that letting children as young as nine use the internet unsupervised might be a recipe for trouble, the professor has a simple answer: "These children are not sitting in a room on their own, but working in a public space where they are visible to others. If they happen upon anything unsuitable they will navigate away from that page immediately, the way that you or I would if we were working in an open-plan office."

Filters designed to protect children, in his experience, often end up as impediments to learning. "I had some children researching a GCSE question about the human heart. When they tried to find an image of a heart, they found it had been blocked, along with all other images of body parts. That kind of censorship is unhelpful."

And if his theories sound utopian, he is not afraid to submit them to an empirical test. "I am confident that the children at St Aidan's will actually perform better at SATS and other exams than they did before this method of teaching was introduced."

His experiments may be in their infancy, historically, and their laissez-faire nature might alarm some traditionalists. Mitra has not yet been able to persuade the Government to adopt his methods on a systematic basis. But, as he would argue, his seemingly newfangled ideas are rooted in something that has not changed since the dawn of time – the natural curiosity of children about the world they live in.

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